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Final Report

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AGNES & Livable Communities

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Project Description

Earlier research used ‘empathy’ to inform transportation students and professionals by producing personal experiences that provided insights to improve public transportation or at least identify ‘friction points’ in an otherwise accessible system. This project explored the ‘age-readiness’ of communities as to their livability for an aging America. Using MIT’s Age Gain Now Empathy System or AGNES, researchers and students sought to better understand everyday movements and friction points using sidewalks, retail environments, housing, and other pedestrian accessible destinations. In addition to using the AGNES system, a collaboration with the AARP provided a platform for shared learning about livability, aging and the critical role of mobility in quality of life across the lifespan.

Method

A series of empathy exercises were held using AGNES. Students, researchers, developers and retailers used AGNES to better understand how to create environments that provided the intensity and density of quality living while providing the accessibility and mobility to ensure connected/engaged lifestyles for everyone of every age. These exercises included navigating the streetscape, use of the MBTA system in Cambridge, and accessing and using various retail outlets and public facilities. In addition, it was determined that a crossdisciplinary, government and industry meeting should be held to address livability and the future ‘age-readiness’ of our communities and transportation systems.

Findings

The AGNES exercise provided insights to the users that included:

- Accessibility does not necessarily mean easy. For example, while the ADA does require accessible public facilities including transit, many of the AGNES users found that navigating streets and vehicles were difficult and contributed to fatigue—fatigue that may be a limiting factor in the desire of older or disabled people from fully engaging in their community.
- The distance between activity centers and transit should be made shorter by providing rest points. These might include covered areas, benches, etc.
- Retailers are a critical part of livable communities, creating activities as well as being powerful influencers on the use/design of frontage, sidewalks, etc.

In addition to the ‘physical’ insights of the AGNES exercise, it was determined that greater collaboration between the various stakeholders should be conducted. This insight resulted in the development of a livable communities symposium held October 5, 2012 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Disruptive

Demographics: Inventing the Future of Place & Space, New Thinking on Housing, Retail & Community in an Aging Society convened retailers, real estate developers, home builders, transportation planners, health and wellbeing specialists and transportation researchers.

Conclusions

The initial study and the 2012 symposium provided the basis for additional planning questions rather than specific answers. However, the framing of these important issues will be critical to ensuring that stakeholders work together to put livability on the national, state and regional agendas. Selected questions and issues include:

- People 45 and older own the majority of the nation's housing stock. Rethinking where they will want to live in the future will have profound transportation implications, e.g., will they remain in the suburbs and rural areas or move to small cities and inner cities?
- Retailers are likely to expand their offerings to older adults and are seeking to be activity centers and not just product providers alone. What shape will these retailers take? Will they be smaller? How will walking be integrated into accessibility of malls, shopping centers and individual stores? Will parking lots shrink to reduce the sheer distance of accessing stores?
- How will transportation services be integrated into leisure and community services that will cater to improving the quality of life for older adults? For example, how might tram services be used to service large parks? Can well lighted and designed walkways encourage exercise and pedestrian traffic? How might new town centers successfully blend all modes from pedestrians, bicycles, and cars to Segways?

Outputs

Results of this work were presented at:

- Transportation Research Board, Poster Session, January 2013
- AARP, Washington, DC
- The Hartford Advance 50 Gerontology Group
- AARP-MIT-New England Center Symposium: Disruptive Demographics: Inventing the Future of Place & Space, New Thinking on Housing, Retail & Community in an

Aging Society

- Draft working paper summarizing the findings of the event: *Inventing the Future of Place & Space: New Thinking on Housing, Retail and Community in an Aging Society* to be distributed by AARP nationwide to developers, MPOs, community planners, etc.